

Grouse shooting in North Yorkshire

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The emptiness is what gets me every time. Miles and miles of heather-clad moorland, purple in the sunlight, and not a soul or building in sight.

No trees, either. England is one of the most densely populated countries in Europe, with more than 1,000 people per square mile, but up here on the grouse moors of North Yorkshire you would never know it. Standing in my butt (a fortified hole in the ground, not dissimilar to an upmarket trench), I am struck by the absence of power cables, mobile-phone masts or any of the usual detritus of habitation.

I don't have a "loader" today, so I am bereft of someone to carry my kit, stand next to me in the butt loading cartridges, and spot where the birds are coming from. Administrative oversight had led to one of my guests being without a loader, and, as he was on his first grouse shoot (and I was his host), it was a case of "family hold back". So I was my own pack horse, carrying gun, cartridge bag, dog peg and a corkscrew affair for tethering the dog that I was manoeuvring on the end of a lead.

My decision to take only one gun looked sensible from three perspectives: I would have been ever more laden with two guns, I had no one to load the first while I discharged the second, and the grouse were not present in vast quantities. It was September 1, and the grouse season had been under way for 17 days, but this was the first time that Roxby Moor had been shot that season and I had heard reports of excellent bags in Scotland and Cumbria.

For three of my guests, this was their first grouse shoot. You can be as experienced a shot as you like on pheasant and partridge, but nothing prepares you for grouse. Used to shooting only when you can see blue sky behind the bird? If you try this tactic with grouse, you would never discharge your gun. They come over the moors in packs, or "cubbies", at speeds that

would put the Red Arrows to shame, hugging the landscape and flying over you at almost head height. Ideally you want to shoot them out front, but grouse shooting also allows you to shoot behind, and this is where the danger lies.

Gamekeepers and agents are wary of people on their first grouse shoot, and for good reason. Guns being discharged at head height by people pumping with adrenaline who then turn around and shoot at the birds flying away from them are dangerous. In the butts you put up canes, or poles, either side of you to remind yourself not to swing the gun through the line. However, at Roxby, there is a large number of “hurdles”, single panels of dark brown fencing which act as an alternative to butts but don’t have poles. So I am anxious from the start, knowing that the errors of my guests will be counted against me. Even in these economically straitened times, there are more people wanting to shoot grouse in the UK than there are days available, and the agent (who controls who can buy what days) will not look kindly on my inviting novices if their inexperience leads to people getting hurt.

After breakfast, we had set off in convoy to the grouse moor from the hotel where we had gathered the night before. We abandoned all but the four-wheel-drives, drew peg numbers (I was number five) and listened to the safety briefing from the agent. We were “live” – allowed to shoot – as soon as we were in our butt and, even though we couldn’t see them for ages, we knew there were 20 or 30 people driving grouse in from miles around towards us.

For a long time, nothing happens. It’s an opportunity to get organised, tether the dog, load the gun, and appreciate the beauty of the moor. Moulded electronic earpieces allow me to hear the grouse before I see them, although the approach of the beaters is heralded by songbirds darting forward, another warning that grouse are about to appear. Then, just as you are least expecting it, one or more grouse fly toward you, following the contours of the moor.

Lagopus lagopus, or the red grouse, is a wild bird, indigenous to the British Isles and unable to be bred in captivity. The birds are present only because a gamekeeper has put in months of work. Although I have discharged thousands of shotgun cartridges in my time each grouse shoot still feels like the first. It is man (or in my case woman) against bird, and for most of the morning the bird won.

As the beaters approach, a horn sounds and we raise our guns to acknowledge it, turning to shoot only behind us until the end of the drive. By lunch, two of my three novices had bagged their first bird, and were accordingly “blooded”. We break bread (or rather, cold meat, pork pies, salad and new potatoes) in an old schoolhouse that serves as a lodge in Roxby village. Alcohol is served but not imbibed in any quantity (even by me, who had managed to miss the damson gin served at elevenses) as most of us are driving back south at the end of the day. Two more drives beckon and the rain has stayed away for the whole day, allowing me to shoot in my shirtsleeves.

When we finally gather back at the cars we count the bag. Not a mass slaughter by any means: 36 brace (72 birds) laid out in pairs and divided by the keeper into younger and older birds. No accidents, and my third novice bagged her first bird – at an impressive 70 yards out – on the final drive. We will return.